

Testimony of Avista to the Environmental Quality Council – Aquatic Invasive Species Program
January 18, 2018

Introduction

Mr. Chairman and members of the Council: For the record, my name is Nate Hall, Clark Fork License Manager for Avista. I have worked for Avista on the lower Clark Fork River since 1991.

Background

Avista is a regulated electric and natural gas utility based in Spokane, Washington. We serve over 375,000 electric customers and 336,000 natural gas customers in a service territory that covers 30,000 square miles in eastern Washington, northern Idaho, and parts of southern and eastern Oregon. We own and operate Noxon Rapids hydroelectric facility in Sanders County on the Clark Fork River, which began operation in 1959. Noxon Rapids Dam, along with Cabinet Gorge hydroelectric facility (located just across the state line in Idaho), create reservoirs along the lower 50 miles of the Clark Fork River prior to flowing into Idaho.

In 1999, Avista and 26 other parties, including the State of Montana, signed the Clark Fork Settlement Agreement, charting a path forward for the next 45 years to address natural resource issues along the lower Clark Fork River. This Agreement embodies the principles of collaboration and adaptive management among state and federal agencies, five Native American Tribes, local governments, landowners, recreationists, non-governmental organizations, and Avista.

Avista, through the Clark Fork Settlement Agreement, has actively participated in addressing AIS issues since the 2007 discovery of Eurasian watermilfoil in both Noxon and Cabinet Gorge reservoirs. Efforts since that time include supporting the creation and ongoing participation in the Sanders County Aquatic Invasive Plants Task Force, providing funding and guidance of research, monitoring, education, and treatment of Eurasian watermilfoil. Participation and funding of these efforts have been based on concerns of potential negative impacts to the natural resources associated with the reservoirs, most of which are managed by the State of Montana, as EWM does not impact the operation of the dams.

Enhanced AIS Program and Associated Funding Mechanism Established by SB 363

As demonstrated by Avista's 10 year record of addressing AIS issues, we support the need to actively protect Montana resources from the introduction of all AIS. We commend the Council in proactively evaluating the enhanced AIS program, as well as looking at potential funding mechanisms prior to the 2019 Legislative session.

Specific to funding this program into the future I offer the following observations.

- The current funding mechanism places an unfair burden on private hydroelectric facilities and Cooperatives. Not only are we one of the largest funding sources, if invasive mussels become established, we will bear substantial ongoing operation and maintenance costs. While we definitely have a role in helping fund this program, it is an issue that impacts all Montana residents and the funding mechanisms should reflect this reality, therefore a contribution from the General Fund should represent a significant percentage of the total program funding.

- Federal hydroelectric facilities need to be included in the ongoing secured funding mechanism.
- Watercraft need to be included in the ongoing funding mechanism. Watercraft are the primary transporter of AIS from waterbody to waterbody. Instituting a watercraft fee, as many other states have done, provides not only funding for an AIS prevention program, but also serves as an educational tool. Based on recreation surveys that Avista has conducted, approximately 50% of the boating activity on our reservoirs is not fishing related. Additionally, wake boats with their large ballast tanks pose some of the greatest threats in transporting AIS. In any case, the primary use of program funding is to inspect watercraft – it only makes sense that watercraft owners help provide funding to inspect their own boats in order to stop the spread of invasive species!
- The use of a fee from fishing licenses, much like a watercraft fee, provides both funding and educational opportunities. While many anglers would also pay a watercraft fee, many do not utilize a watercraft. While non-watercraft anglers do not pose a threat of transporting invasive mussels, they can and do transport other types of AIS.

Conclusion

Avista supports the additional attention to the prevention, educational efforts and control of AIS in Montana. Much like the approach taken in implementing the Clark Fork Settlement Agreement, it will take a collaborative and adaptive approach to address this complex issue. Avista looks forward to the opportunity to continue working with MFWP, DNRC, EQC, and the various other committees focused on this issue to help fine-tune this important ongoing program.